

Historic Blenheim Covered Bridge,
North Blenheim, Schoharie County,
New York

HABS No. NY-359

HABS
N.Y.

48-BLENN,

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
DISTRICT OF NEW YORK

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Historic American Buildings Survey
Andrew L. Delehanty, District Officer
123 North Pearl St., Albany, N.Y.

HISTORIC BLENHEIM COVERED BRIDGE
NORTH BLENHEIM, SCHOHARIE
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OWNER: Town of Schoharie, N.Y.

BUILDER: Nicholas Montgomery Powers, known as the "Yankee Craftsman."; born in Pittsford, Vt. on August 30th, 1817 and died at Clarendon, Vt. in 1897. It was constructed under the supervision of a Turnpike Company, incorporated by the Legislature about April 19, 1838 and known as the "Blenheim Bridge Company."

ARCHITECT: If any, Nicholas Montgomery Powers.

DATE OF ERECTION: The present structure was built in 1854.

CONSTRUCTION: The span is 232 feet in length between the stone abutments, and has the unique distinction of being the longest covered single span wooden bridge in the world.

MATERIAL OF CONSTRUCTION: The bridge was built mostly of virgin pine, but engineers say that its central arch, on which the structure rests, is of solid oak. In its construction it is said that 3600 pounds of bolts and about 1500 pounds of washers were used.

OTHER EXISTING RECORDS: There is record of a letter written to the above Mr. Powers by the Turnpike Co. the letter being dated Sept. 22, 1854 which reads.

"I have been informed that you are a bridge builder and have been expected at Schoharie Court House to repair a bridge but upon inquiry find that it is uncertain that you will be there, therefore write to you concerning the building of a bridge at this place (Blenheim). We wish to build this fall and want to know if you can do the job. Will you please answer on receipt of this letter and let us know when you can come (if at all. Yours truly, Geo. W. Martin." P.S. Please advise Geo. W. Martin, North Blenheim, Schoharie County, N.Y. The above letter is now in the possession of Gratz Powers, his grandson, who lives at the Old Manor, at Clarendon, Vt., the home of his famous grandfather.

Reference; Proceedings of the New York State Historical Association Volume XXX-1932, pages 271, 272 and 273.

Abraham K. Mosley, Arct.

HISTORIC BLENHEIM COVERED BRIDGE

From: Schenectady Union-Star, February 26, 1930

The covered-bridge at Blenheim was erected as a toll bridge. For many years a toll-keeper lived in a small house at one end of this bridge and came out to exact toll from every traveler. Many were the ingenious ways devised to beat the toll-keeper of his charge. But there was always the strong wooden gate which he hastily shut when he saw a doubtful character approaching. And nights it was necessary to beat up and halloo him out of bed in order to get through as the gate was fastened with chains and a huge iron padlock.

7 Nick Powers Gets Contract

J. Dickinson was president of the company organized to build the Blenheim bridge. A contract was let to Nick Powers to design and erect the structure. Powers had built many bridges but this was to be his masterpiece, a veritable monument to his craft.

The Blenheim bridge is entirely of wood, native oak and pine, except a few hand wrought bolts to hold the lattice work together. It is a double bridge, twenty-six feet wide, with two driveways, and, of course, is roofed, otherwise it would have rotted down years ago. Through the center of this bridge, between the two driveways, runs a great arch of wood, built up of heavy planks, extending from pier to pier. For the most part all the beams are pinned and keyed, fitted with wedges for tightening.

This curious structure was not built out over the stream as

most people imagine, but was constructed piece by piece back of the present Village of North Blenheim, near the site, and there set up to make certain that every part was perfect before actual erection over the river was attempted. While the bridge was being made by the carpenters, under the direction of Nick Powers, masons were at work on the two stone piers, one at each bank of the stream.

At that time there was no need for the present steel span at the west end of the covered bridge, as it was all solid ground. It was many years later, during an unusual spring flood, that the river broke through there and washed out a great wide channel, which necessitated another span, or an extension to the old bridge, although no water flowed beneath this steel structure. By that time the builders of wooden bridges were all gone so a steel span was purchased.

A Jug In the Abutments

It is related on excellent authority that the skillful Nick had a natural weakness for something stronger than river water. And old residents of Blenheim insist that there is a large jug of fine old rye whiskey buried in one or the other of the bridge abutments. This was not done intentionally, or with any pomp and ceremony, but quite by accident. President Dickinson, of the bridge company, was a tetotaller, as the "drys" were called in those days. He had a nosey habit of driving up at unexpected moments to see how his bridge was coming along.

One day, so the father of ex-sheriff Adie Bladwin, always stated, (and he worked on the bridge), they sent a Polish stone workman, over the mountain, to Ribbets, now known as Broome Centre,

for a jug of whiskey. Just as he returned with the beverage Dickinson appeared before they had time to uncork it, and so it was hastily hidden in the nearest place available, which happened to be the construction work of one of the abutments. Dickinson stayed right there, his eagle eye on those thirsty masons, speeding up the work, and they never had a chance to rescue it. So, at last, it was necessary to wall the jug in and build the stone work up right around it where, supposedly, it remains to this day.

Built Then Moved to Scene

After the giant bridge was cut and tailored back of the village, and then put together to make certain that all was right, it was taken apart and then began the difficult work of erecting it over the stream. Temporary scaffolding, called "bents", were set up across the river and the floor beams of the new bridge laid and leveled on this superstructure. While this work was in progress a boy was killed, when one of the tall, heavy log bents fell. Besides the ordinary carpenters necessary to put up such a high bridge, Powers hired a number of young fellows, called "climbers" who were not afraid to work high over the fast water. And there youths put together and assembled, all the "sticks" of the high work.

The picturesque old bridge has had many adventures.. It has been afire three times and is now insured like any ordinary house. Twice the roof caught fire from windblown sparks and embers from burning buildings in the village. And one, many years ago, when traveling tinkers went about mending pots and pans, carrying a small charcoal stove to heat their soldering irons, one of these tinkers went to sleep in the bridge and tipped his stove over. The hot coals ignited the wooden bridge but someone happened along in time to put out the fire.

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time to put the fire out and to sober up the "tinker" in the nearby river.

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